DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 045 EC 309 495

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TITLE	Building the Bridge between Community College and Work for Students with Learning Disabilities.
INSTITUTION	International Dyslexia Association, Baltimore, MD.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	10p.; In its: "Perspectives" pp17-20 Spr 2002.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Career Planning; *Civil Rights Legislation; Community Colleges; *Disabilities; Education Work Relationship; Employer Employee Relationship; Employment; *Employment Interviews; Federal Legislation; Higher Education; Job Search Methods; Legal Responsibility; Postsecondary Education; *Self Advocacy; Transitional Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Americans with Disabilities Act 1990; *Reasonable Accommodation (Disabilities)

ABSTRACT

This paper presents information to assist students with learning disabilities (LD), counselors, and employers in building a bridge between community college and employment. It argues that students must learn to articulate how their LD affects them in a variety of situations, especially those requiring learning and performing work related tasks. Information is then provided on: (1) what students with LD need to know about themselves; (2) questions that can aid teachers, counselors, and parents in identifying the functional impact of a learning disability; (3) a three-step process for determining the need for and type of accommodations a student may require in the type of work he or she is interested in seeking; (4) the importance of disability laws and requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act; (5) tips for employers; (6) types of questions students should ask in preparing for a job interview; (7) questions students should ask in identifying barriers and accommodations early in employment situations; (8) deciding whether to disclose a disability; (9) interview tips for students with LD; (10) legal and illegal interview questions; (11) fact-finding questions students should ask of the employer during a job interview; and (12) job retention for students with LD. (CR)

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Building the Bridge Between Community College and Work for Students with Learning Disabilities

By
Deborah Stern

Spring 2002

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BUILDING THE BRIDGE BETWEEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND WORK FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

by Deborah Stern
Perspective, Spring 2002 pp. 17-20
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Building the bridge between community college and work for students with learning disabilities (LD) can and should begin long before they enter college. This article presents information to assist students with LD, counselors and employers to build this crucial bridge. Students must learn to articulate how their LD impacts them in a variety of situations, especially those requiring learning and performing work related tasks. Preparing for job interviews, anticipating barriers throughout the employment process, and developing ways to mitigate these barriers are essential skills that must be learned.

What Students with LD Need to Know about Themselves

Students with LD need to be able to explain their functional limitations that might impact the transition to work. They should understand their unique learning style and be able to describe accommodations that mitigate the impact of the LD. In order to determine a student's knowledge in this area, one of the questions I ask all of my students is, *'What do you feel is the primary disability that has led you to utilize special education services?'*

Student: I *read slowly. I think I was told I have dyslexia.*

Me: *What do you mean by slowly?*

Student: I *have to read things two to three times.*

Me: *Is it that you read slowly, have difficulty understanding what you read, have difficulty remembering it, or all three?*

Student: *All three. Oh, and I can 't spell.*

Me: *Is it easier for you to understand and remember verbal information?*

Student: *It depends on the information.*

Me: *Is* it *the amount of information given at one time?*

Student: *Sometimes.*

Me: *On a job, for example, if your supervisor told you three new tasks to perform, would you be able to remember what was said?*

Student: *Probably not. It is better to give one or maybe two instructions and repeat them.*

Me: *Have you ever used a tape recorder in school or at work?*

Student: *No, but that would probably help a little.*

These are the typical clarifying questions I ask to elicit responses that eventually paint a fairly clear picture of how the LD functionally impacts the student. We also discuss

accommodations the student has used in the past and brainstorm additional accommodations, if necessary. The most distressing response is "I don't have a disability."

Me: *Were you in special education classes in school?*

Student: *Yes, but I don't know why.*

The most desirable, yet uncommon, response is one in which the student clearly explains the LD and describes accommodations. This explanation exemplifies the goal I am working toward.

Student: *My LD impacts my reading writing and auditory processing. I also have difficulty with spelling so I always use a spell check and try to have someone proof my work. I usually have to read things two to three times before I really understand what I am reading. So, I allow more time for homework and I use extra time on tests. When I have to write something, I usually work with a tutor to discuss the subject because it is difficult for me to put my thoughts together. Talking about things before I write them helps me to organize and clarify my thoughts. Since I still have a hard time putting ideas on paper, sometimes I use voice recognition software to write my papers. Talking into the computer is easier than keyboarding or handwriting. I tend to do better in classes that are structured, use outlines,, and have a list of class assignments at the beginning of the quarter. I also use a note taker in lecture classes and sometimes also use a tape recorder.*

The Role of Teachers, Counselors and Parents

Teachers, parents and counselors play a critical role in assisting students with LD to identify, understand and articulate the functional impact of a learning disability. They should facilitate this process by asking questions that focus on function and by breaking the broader questions down into smaller parts. The goal is for students with LD to clearly describe the learning and/or work environment in which they function best.

Questions that can aid in identifying the functional impact of a learning disability include:

- Do you learn most effectively by reading, listening, demonstration, hands-on experience or some combination of these?
- How does your LD affect your reading?
- How many times do you have to read information before you understand it?
- Is it difficult for you to take notes on what you read?
- How does your LD affect your writing?
- Is it easier for you to write using a computer?
- Is it difficult for you to put your thoughts onto paper?
- Would it be easier to verbalize your papers into a tape recorder before writing them?
- Do you have difficulty understanding verbal instructions and information?
- How many instructions can you remember at once?
- Do you usually need to have new information repeated over a period of time before you can retain it?
- Does it help to practice a task while someone is watching and giving you immediate feedback?
- Are you easily distracted?
- Do you learn best in a quiet environment?
- Do you have difficulty concentrating?
- What kinds of tasks are easiest to focus on?

- What classroom accommodations have you used in the past? Have they been effective?

Students who have worked or volunteered in a work setting should answer the following questions:

- Have you had difficulties in past jobs? If yes, describe what was difficult?
- Are there any work situations or tasks you tend to avoid?
- Do you anticipate that you will need any job accommodations?
- Have you used accommodations in the past? If yes, please describe them.
- What kind of boss helps you perform at your best?
- Do you prefer frequent feedback on how you are doing?
- Do you need a quiet workplace?
- Do you work best in an environment that is orderly and structured?

Continue to break questions down into smaller parts until the student can dearly articulate the functional impact of the LD. It is useful for them to have a written and/or tape-recorded version of the explanation so they may practice it. For those who cannot remember, having this information on 3x5 cards is useful, At the appropriate time they can share he information with an employer.

The next logical step is to have students brainstorm potential accommodations with a counselor. Sometimes accommodations that a student has used in the classroom environment - can transfer directly to the workplace. It is helpful, however, to discuss how these would be used. For example, if a student uses a tape recorder in lectures, it might also be useful at work when a supervisor gives verbal instructions. Other accommodations that easily transfer to the work environment include computers with assistive technology, a quiet place to work, a co-worker to take notes in meetings, written instructions using email, etc.

A three-step process helps determine the need for and type of accommodations a student may require in the type of work he or she is interested in seeking.

Step 1: Gather information about the type of work. This may be accomplished by researching job postings, contacting human resource personnel and talking with employees currently performing the jobs a student wants to pursue. Ideally this information is gathered during the career decision-making process rather than waiting until a student is transitioning to work. The following are examples of the types of questions to ask: What is the purpose of the job? What are the essential job duties? What are the most important qualifications that would make someone successful in the job? How much writing does this job require? How is productivity measured?

Step 2: Using the information regarding the impact of the LD combined with what is learned in the first step, a student should identify and document potential difficulties and functional limitations that may impact access or potential for success on the job.

Step 3: Identify possible accommodations that include describing accommodations used in the past. Students should research the cost and availability of accommodations and assess their effectiveness. Sharing ideas with someone who has performed the same type of work the student is seeking is an ideal way to get feedback and to determine if the accommodations seem effective and achievable in a particular work setting. When identifying accommodations, students should think outside of the box and be creative.

Beware of the 'we have always done it this way' mentality of some employers and think of new ways to perform work tasks. For example, we generally presume that a grocery store clerk must stand in one place for hours. The essential job functions, however, are to operate the cash register and interact with customers. Whether the clerk sits or stands is irrelevant. Examples of effective accommodations for students with LD include exchanging a peripheral job duty with a co-worker, using voice input to write reports or working with a job coach during the initial learning phase in a new job.

Importance of Disability Laws

Students with LD should also become familiar with the laws that protect them at work, especially Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and any state employment laws that provide broader protections beyond the federal law. Having this knowledge promotes effective self-advocacy and facilitates job retention. Specifically, it enables students to identify legal vs. illegal interview questions, clarify issues related to disclosure vs. nondisclosure of disability and enables them to assist employers in understanding and adhering to the laws.

Title I of the ADA protects the civil rights of people with disabilities in employment. It is intended to level the playing field by providing equal access and opportunity for success in the workplace. Title I makes it unlawful to discriminate against a qualified individual with a known disability who can perform the essential functions of a job with or without reasonable accommodation. It requires employers to provide reasonable (i.e., effective) accommodation(s) unless this results in undue hardship, (usually interpreted as extreme expense) or results in a direct threat. It covers employers who have fifteen or more employees, and does not interfere with the employer's right to hire the "best qualified" candidate nor does it establish hiring quotas.

In order to be covered by the ADA an applicant or an employee must be considered as having a disability under the law. This requires meeting one of three criteria: 1) have an impairment that "substantially limits" one or more "major life activities", such as seeing, hearing, learning and walking; or 2) have a record of such impairment; or 3) be regarded as having such impairment.

Those living in California are fortunate because A.B. 2222 provides much broader protection than does the ADA. For example, it is much easier to qualify as disabled in California. The major life activity does not have to be substantially limited; the impairment must only render the major life activity "difficult". In contrast to the ADA, A.B.2222 states that mitigating measures, such as eyeglasses or medications, must be ignored and working as a major life activity may include working in one particular job.

Tips for Employers

Employees with disabilities have reported that their disability confronted them with issues that did not arise for nondisabled employees. Some co-workers and bosses tended to be overly helpful, sometimes even condescending or distrustful toward them. Co-workers and bosses may have made unwarranted assumptions about cognitive ability, as illustrated by over explaining, oversimplifying, or double-checking work. Some co-workers, and bosses may have pitied employees with disabilities and presumed that some tasks were simply too difficult for them. In general, they tended to over-protect employees with disabilities.

Some employers have experience working with employees with LD, but many do not. The following basics should be considered when interviewing and working with employees with LD:

- Don't make assumptions based on disability; two people with the same disability are not the same.
- Be aware of the impact of culture on attitudes and behaviors toward people with disabilities. Disability is merely another factor to consider along with skills, education, interests, work history, work attitude and personality.
- A disability neither defines the person nor defines what a person can or cannot do.
- An accommodation that is effective for one person may not be effective for another person with the same disability.
- People with disabilities are not necessarily experts on disability including their own and may not necessarily understand work-related barriers and needs.
- People with disabilities are not necessarily comfortable with others who have disabilities.

Transition from Community College to Work - Trepidation vs. Preparation

The key to successful transition from school to work is preparation before the job interview. This includes researching employer needs, flushing out potential barriers caused by the learning disability, identifying effective accommodations and conducting a cost-benefit analysis to determine if and/or when to disclose disability.

A student should begin researching his or her career field a minimum of two to three months before graduation. The goal is to learn as much as possible about the job or career for which they are preparing. In addition to reading newspapers, periodicals and materials found in career centers, students should contact human resource personnel and employees who are working in the career area of interest. Most people are willing to answer students' questions if the questions are clear, to the point and are relatively narrow in scope. The following are examples of the types of questions students should ask:

- What are the minimum educational requirements necessary to qualify for this type of work?
- To be competitive in the current labor market, do you need more than the minimum education?
- What are the three most important qualities necessary for success in this job?
- What are the most important job duties?
- What are some of the biggest problems or challenges in this type of work?
- What is the best way to get your foot in the door if you are a recent college graduate without any work experience?

Identify Barriers and Accommodations Early

In order to determine potential barriers and determine the need for accommodations, students should ask questions such as the following:

- How much writing is involved?
- How important are verbal communication skills?
- Does this work involve a lot of short deadlines?
- What kinds of problem solving skills make someone successful in this type of work?
- Does this job require good organizational and time-management skills?

- As students identify job duties and work requirements that might be impacted by the LD, they should develop a list of potential accommodations.

Disclosure vs. Non-disclosure Issues

Students should evaluate the potential impact of disclosure vs. non-disclosure of their disability. They should draft a list of the benefits and the negative impacts of disclosure and non-disclosure for all phases of the employment process. These phases may include: the application process, which may involve basic skiffs testing; the first interview and follow-up interviews; post-offer medical and/or drug tests if applicable; offer of employment, the first day on the job; reviews by a supervisor and/or promotions.

Deciding whether or not to disclose a learning disability is one of the most daunting issues facing students with hidden disabilities. They should anticipate what assumptions might be made if the LD is disclosed vs. not disclosed and which will have the greatest positive or negative impact. Often, the answers are not easy and there are "catch 22" type situations. For example, a student whose LD impacts ability to write faces a dilemma if the interviewer asks for a verbal answer concurrent with writing important information on a white board. In this instance, the student probably loses more by not disclosing. However, there is also a risk in disclosing. The student must be well prepared to briefly address the writing issues and describe accommodations that mitigate the impact of the LD while clearly indicating potential for success in the job.

Some applicants feel they are not being truthful if they do not disclose a disability during an interview. However, if an applicant does not require accommodation in the interview, one must ask why the applicant would disclose a disability, which is personal information that may not be appropriate in the interview. If there is no need for accommodation, why disclose?

Interview Tips for Students with Learning Disabilities

The purpose of the job interview from the perspective of the interviewee is to get the job. In order to do so, an applicant must convince the employer that he or she will be successful, make positive contributions and will fit into the work culture. Here are some basic guidelines that can be effective in accomplishing this: Focus on function and success by clearly describing relevant qualifications, skills, education and experience. Include brief examples that demonstrate the potential to add value and improve the workplace. Ask questions which help to determine the interviewer's needs. Be open-minded and try to understand the interviewer's point of view. If the LD is disclosed in the interview, be aware of stereotypes, myths and fears that may color the outcome of the interview and dispel them. Focus on common goals. Students should always be prepared to answer the following questions: What qualifies you to do this job? What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses? Why should I hire you?

Legal vs. Illegal Interview Questions

Students should remember that the purpose of the interview is to determine whether an applicant is qualified to do the job. Interview questions should illicit information that assists the interviewer in determining whether a candidate will be successful in the position. If an applicant has an undisclosed learning disability, the following questions are **illegal** to ask *before* an offer for employment is made:

- Do you need any accommodations to perform the essential job functions?

- Do you have a disability that might impact your ability to do this job?
- This job involves computer data entry. Will you need any special equipment to access the computer?

These questions are illegal primarily because they elicit disability-related information that a candidate has not disclosed.

The following questions are **legal** to ask all applicants in the job interview *before* an offer of employment has been made:

- This job involves computer data entry. Can you tell me and/or show me how., you would do that?
- Here are my attendance requirements. Can you meet them?
- Here is a list of the essential job functions. Can you perform them?

An interviewer is allowed to ask narrowly focused questions to follow up on disability related information that a candidate has disclosed. The questions, however, should be job related. It is not legal to ask questions such as, is your condition temporary or permanent, progressive or stable, or how do you feel about your learning disability?

Fact-finding Questions in the Job Interview

Students should also be prepared to ask questions of the employer. The following are suggestions:

- Who will evaluate the work done in this position and what are the key indicators of success?
- What are the primary results expected of the person selected for this position both short-term and long-term?
- What is the most significant challenge (or problem) that needs to be addressed in this position?

These questions flush out additional information that provides the student with LD an opportunity to address challenges and anticipate areas in which the LD may impact access or potential for success.

Some job accommodations are built into the corporate culture. These include flex time, telecommuting, cross-training so that employees can easily switch job duties, computers with spell and grammar check, large print options built in, voice activated software and so on. Before disclosing a disability, an applicant should ask fact-finding questions to identify accommodations that already exist in the workplace. For example, if a student needs a flexible work schedule, he or she might say, "There are many different work cultures. Some companies have specified times that employees must be at work, some have flex schedules, some prefer their employees to telecommute. What is the work culture here?"

The following are additional examples of fact-finding questions that uncover a range of important information:

- What kind of work space will the person in this position have?
- Do most employees have cubicles or private offices?
- How would you describe your management style?
- What are the three most important qualities the person in this position should have?
- How are project deadlines established and are they usually short-term or long-term projects?

- What kind of computer hardware and software do you use?
- Do employees use voice-activated software or rely primarily on key boarding?
- What will happen the first day on the job?
- Is there someone assigned as a contact person or trainer?
- If the person in this position is successful, what new responsibilities might be added?

Job Retention for Students with LD

Internships before graduation from college are one of the most effective ways students can enhance their potential for retention in a future job. Participating in an internship related to the career or job for which a student is preparing is an ideal way to gain realistic information and greater independence. Internships enable students to assess the potential impact of the LD, experiment with accommodations and practice the skills and apply the knowledge that they are learning in school. Often, students cannot make the connection between the classroom and the workplace. School takes on a new and enhanced importance and relevance when students participate in internships.

Developing effective communication strategies is important to job retention. Internships afford students opportunities to practice discussing disability related issues with co-workers, supervisors and managers. If a learning disability does create difficulties or pose barriers to success, the student should engage the employer in problem solving without making judgments. They should work together as a team. It is important to remember that the student/employee is not the problem. The problem is to clearly identify how the learning disability is creating difficulties and to brainstorm accommodations which may include the use of technological aids.

Conclusion

Building the bridge between school and work is a process that necessitates active participation on the part of students with LD and their employers. The construction of this bridge should begin years before the actual transition to work takes place. Encouraging students to be curious about their unique learning disabilities, learning styles, strengths and weaknesses facilitates this process. Knowledge is power and in the case of students with LD, knowledge is an effective tool that can enhance the likelihood of success and minimize the potential for failure at work. Every student should gather as much information as possible regarding the impact of his or her LD, effective accommodations, job duties and requirements, employer expectations and legal rights and responsibilities of applicants, employees and employers in relation to disability issues throughout the employment process.

Deborah Stern holds a M. S. in Rehabilitation Counseling and is a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor who has dedicated her career to advancing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. She has 20 years of experience in community college, corporate, and non-profit environments. Currently she teaches job search strategies, career exploration and employment law at De Anza College. She has made presentations to corporations, universities and professional groups including Apple Computer, Inc., NASA-AMES Research, Stanford University and the Society for Disability Studies. Ms. Stern founded the Bay Area Coalition for Employment of People with Disabilities (BACED), a nationally recognized employment and training coalition.

Posted July 24, 2002

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